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ABSTRACT

This study explores, from a critical-theory perspective, the relationship of power among stakeholders in either a mandated or voluntary elementary-school-site decision-making body (SSDMB). The purpose is to describe, explain, and clarify complexities regarding the influence exerted by parents on the decision-making process in two selected elementary schools. A case study format is used with a naturalist methodology that includes semistructured interviews, nonparticipant positioned observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Findings suggest: (1) no relative difference between mandated and voluntary school-site decision-making bodies; (2) parent participation in school governance is defined by socioeconomic status; (3) principals remain key to school governance implementation; (4) participating parents do feel more connected and informed, but become trustees of the status quo; and school-size decision-making bodies are not an effective reform strategy. Parents are restricted by their own involvement in the dominant school culture, by authoritarian/administrative state controls, and by effective, organizationally vested principals. There must be a change in the system that addresses conventional organizational thinking. If SSDMBs remain a narcissistic strategy of middle-class populists, schools will not change and a potentially radical strategy will be nullified. Contains 70 references. (MLH/Author)

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Running head: SCHOOL-SITE DECISION MAKING

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Elementary Schools With Mandated Or Voluntary School-Site Decision Making: A Multiple Case Perspective

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Abstract

Elementary school school-site decision-making bodies (SSDMB) are examined from a critical theory perspective. Two sites are presented: one with a mandated school-site decision-making body and another with a voluntarily established school-site decision-making body. A case study format is used with a naturalist methodology that includes semi-structured interviews, non-participant positioned observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Findings suggest (1) no relative difference between mandated and voluntary SSDMBs, (2) parent participation in school governance is defined by SES, (3) principals remain key to school governance implementation, (4) participating parents become trustees of the status quo, and (5) school-site decision-making bodies are not an effective reform strategy. Propositions for consideration and further investigation are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades reform minded educators, parents, community members, and lawmakers have advocated for greater participation from all stakeholders in educational change and improvement. Potent forces of change have led to speculation that a key to successful instructional, program, and curricular change is the inclusion of parents as primary decision makers. Customary decision-making processes have been set aside either voluntarily or by legal mandate in many districts around the country. Decentralized school-site decision-making bodies have been established with the charge of improving local education. In some of these places parents, as lay educators and leaders within decision-making bodies, have been instrumental in formulating school site policy, enhancing school culture, and expanding instructional choices.

There is strong evidence that parent involvement in schools increases student achievement and strengthens the family/school bond (Comer, 1980; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein, 1992; Henderson, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Quint, 1994; Rioux & Berla, 1995). A primary component of recent school reform recommendations is parent involvement (Barth, 1990; Coleman, 1966; Goodlad, 1984; National Education Goals Panel, 1994; Schlechty, 1990; Sizer, 1984). The growth of documentation regarding the value of parent involvement in schools along with the propagation of reform recommendations for school change has led to the development of many typologies and models suggesting various kinds and degrees of parent participation in schools (Comer, 1980; Epstein, 1992; Henderson, Murburger, & Ooms, 1986; Levin, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1995; Swap, 1993; Vincent, 1996). Such typologies have assigned parents to various levels of school operations. At the level of decision making,

governance, and advocacy, parents are asked to be true contributors in the development and implementation of various aspects of the schools' programming and activities.

Researchers have typically examined the empowerment of teachers as it relates to restructuring and decision-making bodies (Maeroff, 1988; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Peterson, McCarthey, & Elmore, 1996; Schlechty, 1990). There appears to be little clear understanding of the interpersonal and group dynamics, and the overall consequences of parent involvement in school-site decision making in schools.

School Power/Influence Relationships

Parent involvement in schools may shift power, influence, and authority in various directions at both the personal and organizational levels. However, except in isolated incidences, these shifts in power, influence, and authority have had marginal effect (Sarason, 1995). As access to schools increases for parents and families an understanding of how these stakeholders fill the various roles they assume is important.

Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly (1985) reported that power "can be derived from interpersonal, structural, and situational bases" (p. 323). As participants and stakeholders in their child's education parents have at their disposal several means of influence: (a) persuasion; (b) manipulation and rational inducement; © coercion; (d) physical force, and; (e) reciprocal control that can be utilized within decision-making bodies (Dahl, 1961). There are an indefinite number of critical links in the chain of causation and therefore, an indefinite number of ways that parents can wield their power and influence (Dahl, 1961). According to Saxe (1984), there is no all-inclusive way to study the various influences on the control of education. Thus, researchers

should attempt to obtain several *snapshots* of parents working within school-site decision-making bodies. The members of the school-site decision making body and the general school community will elucidate the actual power and influence parents exert.

Until recently, parents have had inconclusive influence on schools (Dahl, 1961; Sarason, 1995). Parent influence was rarely considered when discussing public education except in the role of Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) or other supporting roles. Dahl (1961) identified the most influential educational leaders as the mayor, the school board and the superintendent. Scribner and Layton (1995) suggest that various government officials including governors, legislators, and chief state educators have influence in setting policy such as parent involvement recommendations, but have little control over program implementation. According to Sarason (1995) parent involvement policy and practice can claim few victories in influencing schools.

Parents have the ability to act and participate, but have not demonstrated the commitment, understanding, and perseverance necessary for change. If it is true that most parents "use their resources for purposes other than gaining influence over school decisions" (Dahl, 1961, p. 305), then the call for parent involvement asks them to reach beyond this expectation.

Voluntary and Mandatory Parent Involvement

McDonnell and Elmore (1987) distinguish between mandates, inducements, capacity building, and system-changing as generic classes of actions that affect policy implementation. Fullan (1993) defines systems-change as "when enough kindred spirits coalesce in the same change direction" (p. 143). System-changing can be seen as synonymous with volunteerism. The voluntary pursuit of school-based decision

making by local stakeholders could be considered a system-changing policy instrument.

Mandated change has been the subject of much research and is generally considered an unsuccessful strategy for effecting permanent change (Fullan, 1993). Yet, there are numerous state governments that are implementing mandatory school-site decision-making bodies. It is reasonable to contrast settings which implement voluntary and mandated parent involvement in school-site decision making. The nuances of the two foundations for change, voluntary *grass roots* change and mandatory *top down* change, may shed light on effective, balanced, parent participation strategies.

School-Site Decision-Making Bodies

The parent involvement crusade and the SSDMB[1] movement have grown simultaneously. There are extensive writings about the significance of school-site decision-making bodies in public schools (Brown, 1990; Conley, 1993; Elmore, 1990; Prasch, 1990; Schlechty, 1990). At first, SSDMBs were concerned with teacher empowerment rather than parent empowerment (Elmore, 1990). The bodies tended to "micro-manage" rather than act on core competencies such as curriculum, budget, and personnel (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). As parents gained a foothold on decision-making bodies a myriad of issues arose which helped to shift emphasis. Parents as equal partners, with equal vote, sitting alongside professional educators, are often looked upon as unprepared and uninformed. Recommendations proclaim a need for training in group dynamics, educational issues, mediation, and other democratic skills for both parents and educators (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; McLaughlin & Shields, 1987; Moles, 1987). Despite numerous difficulties (DeLacy, 1990), school-site decision-making

bodies with a parent-participation component have remained popular with both local and state governing bodies. This is verified by the continued increase in their implementation and the view of their relative strengths (Prasch, 1990). Investigations of school-site decision-making bodies in diverse geographic contexts and different resource configurations are needed to determine what set of factors may be combined to affect school governance in a constructive fashion. Parent power and influence as a key component of school-site decision-making must also be examined closely.

Statement of the Problem

The formation of school-site decision-making bodies will probably continue at all levels of public schooling. However, to assume that they have the same operational definitions would be a vast oversiinplification. School-site decision-making bodies are developed in unique, local, social and political environments which are greatly influenced by idiosyncratic power relationships. A deeper understanding of school-site decision-making bodies, their internal operations, their external potential, and their integration of the parent participation component within school communities is necessary.

Research Questions

This study is a critical exploration of the relationship of power among stakeholders in either a mandated or voluntary elementary school-site decision-making body. The purpose is to describe, explain, and clarify the complexities regarding the influence parents exert on the decision making process in two selected elementary schools. The case studies presented will be examined for the strengths and weaknesses of voluntary versus mandated parent involvement in decision making at the school site and will provide rich descriptive information for comparison and

analysis. The questions that guide the case study's inquiries are:

(1.) In what ways are parents involved in decision making in selected elementary schools?

(2.) How, if at all, does parent power manifest itself through school-site decision-making bodies at the school site?

(3.) How, if at all, does the distribution of power among stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators) differ within mandated and voluntary elementary school-site decision-making bodies?

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

A multiple case study format with a critical theory perspective was used in this study. Emerging factors are developed through the results of interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus-group discussions over a period of one school year.

A Critical Theory Perspective

Critical Theory scrutinizes the "nature of representation and power relations" (McLaren, 1995, p. 274). It questions the "framework of the way we organize our lives or the way our lives are organized for us" (Foster, 1986, p. 72). Critical theorists attempt to define the nature of human relationships with particular consideration of the variables of class and power. Researchers such as Apple (1982), Freire (1993), Giroux (1983), Macedo (1994), McLaren (1989), and Willis (1977) utilize as their investigative underpinning the examination of human interaction and collective action inspecting closely the power relationships that exist in the social/historical/political fabric of society. Democratic participation that leads to action, an analysis of the potent forces that may bring this about, and the examination of the interactive

relationship between these forces are fundamental perspectives of a critical investigation.

Lightfoot (1978) calls for investigators to "develop research strategies that reveal holistic, complex, and longitudinal descriptions of life patterns" (p. 169). She acknowledges the unique and subtle ways in which human beings communicate with each other and suggests that this subtleness of meaning conveyed between subjects is something that is important to understand if one is to examine the place in which power shelters itself in human dialogue. Critical theorists such as Freire (1993) and Foster (1986) do the same and recognize that school sites are not unified, clearly defined wholes but are hazy "borderlands and zones of contest that can be understood through forms of meta-rhetorical criticism" (McLaren, 1995, p. 277). That is, to understand schools and the relationship parents have within them investigators must ask open-ended questions that challenge the assumptions and accepted norms and practices of the school setting. Researchers must recognize that field research, therefore, takes place in deeply complex social/historical settings (McLaren, 1995). This factor along with the nature of the research questions and the respective variables they generate supports the selection of a critical perspective.

Thus, the process of integration of educational theory with educational practice is bridged by research that links the common problem of "progressive ideas of educationalists and the 'conservative' attitudes of many parents and communities" (Carspecken, 1991, p. 13). The central dilemma of this investigation, therefore, is framed by the commitment to change and improve of reform-minded stakeholders and by the importance of parent and community to participate, understand, internalize, and support change and improvement in schools. A void exists regarding the

examination of parent participation and its ability to wield power in the contrasting settings of a school which has voluntarily established school-site decision-making with one that has been mandated to implement a school-site decision-making body

Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) postulate that case studies are a culmination of naturalistic inquiry that provide rich description, depth, and detail. Sanders (1981) supports: "case studies help us to understand events, projects, and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object" (cited in Merriam, 1988, p. 32). The examination of a single issue, e.g. parent involvement in the decision-making process of school, across multiple settings using the same conceptual perspective and research questions will be used in this study (Campbell & Mazzoni, 1976; Marshall, Mitchell & Wirt, 1986). A naturalistic critical case study allows for the development of emerging factors that inform the research questions and provide a lens to *see* thematic connections between settings (Carspecken, 1991; McCaleb, 1994; Quint, 1994; Willis, 1977). The steps for the writing of a case study are outlined by Merriam (1988), and include: (a) determining the audience of the study; and (b) selecting a focus for its content. Both steps will be used to report the data.

Selection of Research Sites

Critical cases are "those that . . . are for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (Patton, 1990, p. 102). Patton (1990) identifies critical case sampling as a method of research that makes both "strategic and logical sense" (p.103) when attempting to yield information regarding decision makers' actions and understanding. Two public schools with similar student populations and demographics were selected for the study. Criteria for site selection included: (a) an active parent

involvement component in place on school-site decision-making bodies for more than two years; (b) different geographic locations (Connecticut and Massachusetts); © similar demographic make-up (to protect against differences more diverse settings may generate); and (d) the identification of one voluntary school-site decision-making body and one mandated school-site decision-making body to allow for examination of contrasting effects. A voluntary site is a site which has developed a school-site decision-making body without policy direction or the force of law outside the school district. A mandated site is a site where a school-site decision-making body is required by state law.

Schools that are perceived as average in the geographic region were chosen. A single contrasting variable was used. These selection criteria were chosen to reinforce the generalizability of the study.

Entry and Access

The researcher forwarded a formal letter detailing the study and requesting access to superintendents, principals, and school-site decision-making body chairs. Follow-up phone calls were made to these sites. Upon confirmation of access by the principal, one site which met stated criteria was selected and then another site was selected based on matched demographic data. Each school was visited before the formal study began and the issues of human subjects research, confidentiality, and dissemination of the study results were discussed with the school principal.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred throughout the school calendar year. Data collection included four primary strategies: (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) non-participant observations, (c) focus groups, and (d) study of documents. These four data sources

provided a more holistic view of the power/influence relationships within the parent involvement dynamic of the school-site decision-making bodies. Multiple methods and divergent data sources were employed to ensure trustworthiness (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). It is impossible to eliminate all biases; however, the use of multiple, divergent data sources provided necessary information in which to triangulate results and enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Semi-structured Interview Data

A minimum of two teachers and two parents were interviewed based on their membership on school-site decision-making bodies. Other teachers and parents were selected randomly by the principal from the general school population for interview. Sixteen interviews were conducted. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. An interview protocol was developed for identified groups. The interview protocol was used consistently to insure that each interview covered areas under investigation[2a]. Questions were asked about the perceived meaning of school-site decision-making, about the perception of power relationships within the school, and about how problems are presented and resolved within the school site decision making body. The same interview protocol was implemented for each interviewee and was used as a guide that led to "informal conversational interviews" (Patton, 1990, p. 228) which addressed research questions and allowed for the emergence of new or unconsidered questions. Prior to the inception of the study the interview protocol was piloted among a small set of educational professionals and parents to determine clarity of questions and consistency in eliciting responses.

Non-participant Observation Data

Observations included school site decision-making bodies in formal meetings, PTO/A meetings, daily operations at the school site, interpersonal interactions among stakeholders, conversations, dialogues, and spontaneous issue-oriented conversations. Field notes of observations were maintained and reconstructed for analysis. Throughout the observations the researcher examined patterns of actions (i.e., conversations between the principal and parents) between stakeholders and attempted to develop an understanding of participants' perspective. A review of observation dates and times, persons to be included in the study, and the study's goals and expectations was completed by the researcher and the school principal before the site visits.

Focus Group Data

A third source of data collection is focus groups. Focus groups by their nature uncover facts which relate to complex behavior (Krueger, 1994). In this study focus groups were initiated at each site and consisted of teachers, parents, and administrators. Teachers and parents met in separate focus groups of approximately five members each. A focus group protocol was used to insure consistency between focus groups[2b]. Data were collected using audio tapes which were later transcribed and field notes were taken. A field note report form was used to highlight key thoughts during the focus-group discussion. An assistant moderator was used to record field notes while the moderator (researcher) conducted the focus group. Focus groups were held at various times of the day to allow participation of all interested parties. All focus groups were conducted at the selected sites.

Documentation Data

A fourth source of data collection included documents such as minutes of decision-making body meetings, school-to-home correspondence, school faculty meeting agendas, posting of special projects initiated by decision-making bodies, and other documents as needed. The exegesis of documents, interview data, and observational information were used to confirm data and allowed for emerging themes to be discovered.

The researcher maintained a reflective journal to assist in clarifying thinking, observations, and the integration of facts and experiences. Since the researcher is a school principal, he is a positioned subject and therefore cannot avoid observer bias (Rosaldo, 1989). A reflective journal was maintained to assist in identifying preconceptions and assumptions that might influence data collection (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The journal is representative of the thought processes and flow of perceptions and information into the researcher's awareness as the study progressed. The journal was also used to guard against misinterpretation, oversimplification, and selective filtering.

Data Analysis

The process of inquiry is hermeneutic in nature (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996). The inquiry seeks to develop understanding through examination of lived experiences. The confirmation of specific pieces of information and the adjustment of data analysis strategies are continuous. Data from interviews, observations, focus groups, and documents from each source were coded according to the research question format and emerging themes. Domain and taxonomic analysis,

systems for discovering tacit knowledge as conceptualized by informants, were used to examine data (Spradley, 1979).

Data analysis for this study is comparative and confirmatory in nature. All data have been triangulated (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The triangulation process, along with member checking, peer debriefing, use of key informants, auditing and reflective journaling, helps to clarify collected information. Organizing these data provides a case record that is related to the components of the study and includes: parent involvement, power and influence, and school site decision making bodies.

A qualitative data management program, QSR NUD*IST (WINDOWS version) was utilized for data entry and facilitated identifying and coding nascent themes centering on parent involvement, the power and influence dynamic, and the internal workings of school-site decision-making bodies. The analysis of data continued through the construction of the written descriptions of the cases.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation of data was achieved through multiple sources of semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, and focus groups. Member checking was accomplished by continuous checking with participants throughout the data collection process and by checking with the building principals who served as key informants. Long-term engagement was established by the maintenance of investigation site contact for a school calendar year. Participants were involved in the continued reconceptualization of the study through interviews and informal conversations with the researcher. Researcher's assumptions and biases were addressed through the establishment of a theoretical perspective and through a full

consideration of the limitations of the study. Truth value was further enhanced by the use of a positioned observer. According to Rosaldo (1989), a positioned observer lends the perspective of experience to the investigation.

Generalizability is obtained in multi-case qualitative studies by the use of predetermined questions, sampling, and the use of specific procedures for coding and analysis (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1984). Substantial descriptions of the sites, the informants, and the results of interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus groups have been developed. After case studies were written, key informants reviewed for accuracy and to verify information. A peer debriefer with experience in qualitative research reviewed transcripts, field notes, coding schemes, tapes, discs, and supporting documentation.

Maintaining Confidentiality

All tapes and transcripts are number coded. All names were eliminated from reported items. All interviewees were assured by the researcher that data would only be reported out as related to the general categories of parents or teachers at Site #1 or Site #2. In the study Site #1 and Site #2 are given pseudonyms, Hilltop Elementary and Valley Elementary, respectively. Parents and teachers are identified as such and pseudonyms are used where clarity dictates. No audio tapes, interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, journal entries, or other raw data were made available to any of the informants. Member checking was conducted by factually relating information verbally to the researcher. The confidentiality process was discussed in detail at the beginning of the study with each school principal.

CROSS-CASE COMPARISON

Table 1 offers a cross-case comparison of the selected research sites.

Table 1

Cross-case Comparison of Selected Data from Hilltop Elementary School and Valley Elementary School

Type of Data	Hilltop Elementary	Valley Elementary
Demographics		
Community population	16,000 (1990)	16,155 (1996)
Per capita income	$13,438	$18,239
Per pupil expenditure	$8,069	$5,354
Average class size	21 to 1	23 to 1
Student Population	518	555
Free/reduced Lunch	36.7%	9%
Title I School	No	Yes
Council Make-up	Voluntary	Mandated
Number of members	13 teachers and staff	4 teachers
	3 parents	4 parents
	No community member	1 community member
	Principal	Principal
Decision-making process	Vote	Consensus
Meeting time	Immediately after school	Evenings
	Monthly	Monthly
Council - Years Active	3+	2+
Improvement Plan	Yes	Yes
Findings Summary:		
Mandated vs Voluntary	No significant difference from Mandated	No significant difference from Voluntary
How/Why parents participate	PTO, Council, home/ Self-efficacy, special issues, commitment, comfort	PTO, Council, home/ Self-efficacy, special issues, commitment, comfort
Parent power	Limited	Limited
Related Findings:		
Interpersonal power	Little influence	Little influence
Structural power	Oppressive	Oppressive
Situational power	Group action	No group action
Principal power	Significant Influence	Significant Influence

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND PROPOSITIONS

The purpose of this investigation was to focus a critical lens on (1) the ways in which parents are involved in school, (2) the manner in which parents exert their power through school-site decision making, and (3) to determine the nature of parent power within a voluntarily formed school-site decision-making body and a mandated school-site decision-making body. The study sought to describe case evidence at two sites that would enlighten the nature of power relationships within individual school cultures and among the informants. The study was conducted at two elementary schools: one in Connecticut and one in Massachusetts.

Discussion

All findings are presented as results from the two sites under investigation and no pretense toward generalization is made. It is the responsibility of the consumer to make the appropriate connections and associations of the results to his or her own unique setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study is offered as a heuristic, that is, as an aid to further the reader's understanding of power relations within school governance structures.

Because it is essential to the study to be able to compare and contrast results as they emerge, the case evidence from both sites are considered simultaneously. Dialogue is framed around the three research questions and the emerging themes.

In What Ways are Parents Involved in Decision Making in Selected Elementary Schools?

Parent power is derived from being present at the decision-making site.

Philosophers and scientists have debated Schrodinger's 1935 thought exercise regarding a troubled cat for years. The essence of the theory is that by the mere presence of an observer a situation is irrevocably and unpredictably changed. The

repercussions of being present may be the very function that parents perform at the decision-making table. As a result of their mere presence changes the direction, the intent, and tenor of the dialogue between educators and the community occurs. Teachers become more cautious about how they present information. They measure their words in the presence of parents. Parents modify their dialogue as well. They may feel intimidated or less informed than the teachers and may remain mute about issues that have real importance to them. A parent shares her perceptions,

> I didn't have the self-confidence to come in and question what a teacher was doing with my child. I figured I'd look like a fool if I said anything. It is very intimidating to go into a school system, to sit with a college-educated person.

Counter to this, parents who do participate may develop feelings of being more well informed and they may see themselves as being able to contribute as they participate in school decision-making as they gain confidence about the issues. One mother observed,

> The council has helped me a lot to reaffirm and renegotiate coming back in [to education], and knowing what's going on, and the different terminology, and the different ideas.

In both cases, parents are being drawn into the bureaucratic structure of the existing school culture. Their cultural indoctrination is struck in bold relief by two opposing possibilities: (a) being part of the marginalized or disinterested group which is inveigled by the intimidation of the bureaucracy of school or, (b) becoming part of the informed school elite who do not see themselves losing strength as they participate and become more empathetic to the operational nuances of school.

These opposing results do not belie the observations and dialogues of informants from both study sites which illustrate the power of parent presence in school governance. Some parents come to the table with single issues, others are more eclectic in their approach, and still others harbor altruistic hopes for their participative efforts. In both cases, the *mere* presence of parents changes the process of decision-making. Thus, one might ask, does this influence significantly change in some positive fashion the decision-making process?

Hilltop Elementary uses a decision-making process that is guided by voting. The Valley Elementary tends to operate from a more consensus oriented format. Decision-making by consensus is time consuming because of the need for all participants to have their say and to understand the issues fully. Voting tends to be more curt and less participatory as a 51% majority rules the day. Decision-making by consensus at times is a demonstration of a minority that is simply willing not to oppose a decision. If the two councils tend to operate with dissimilar decision-making processes then why are their results so similar? The answer may be that, in both cases, there is an overarching cultural oppression which does not allow the Councils to move in any direction not approved by the bureaucratic structure. The SSDMBs change efforts are ineffectual because they are attempted within the suppressive bureaucratic culture of school. It seems that only by moving outside the bureaucracy can truly democratic educational governance occur. Parents, by their mere presence, do affect the internal operation of the Councils, but they do not change the Councils' outward performance. The concept and implementation of SSDMBs at both sites remains inchoate.

Parent participation in school-site decision making is defined by middle class values rather than by reform efforts.

The presence of parent participation in school governance as a strategy for school improvement is a popular method for addressing the deficit of school (Barth, 1990; Conley, 1993; Goodlad, 1984; Meier, 1995; Quint, 1994; Schlechty, 1990). It is thought that parent participation improves schools and improves the prospects of student achievement (Chavkin & Williams, 1985; Henderson & Berla, 1994). The *parent voice* movement is a cornerstone of the improvement movement (Comer, 1980; Levin, 1987; Meier, 1995; Quint, 1994; Sizer, 1984; Zigler, 1987). A Hilltop teacher observes,

> I think that's when it's good, when it leads to confrontation. When they come here and complain, instead of staying home and complaining to the neighbors.

There is evidence that parents can attempt change by exerting their powerful political will (Carspecken,1991; Willis, 1977). They can be rebellious towards the establishment, but results tend to be ill-fated and disruptive. These are specific instances of crucial socio-political crisis.

It has become fashionable to have school governance councils and to encourage parent participation in schools. A phronesis (the desire to act truly and rightly) goal that, in and of itself, can hardly be argued with. A parent offers the following,

> I think functions that we do, the decisions that are made, the discussions that are had, are very valuable. And I feel an intricate part in the school being on the council. I feel very involved. I think any parent who has a chance to be on that will have the same feeling.

But what appears to happen to the parents as they participate? They seemed to become wrapped up in a bureaucratic and by definition of popular, middle class

narcissism (Macedo, 1994). Parents and their compatriots, the teachers and administrators, are susceptible to the permeability of schools to socio-political issues (Lightfoot, 1978). They are doing this participation *thing* because it is mandated by law, or voluntarily formed by local demand, and in both cases dictated by the broad spurious argument of popular school reform.

Participation through indoctrination is oppression. Drawing parents into the structure of schools may help to assure that malevolent structures remain, as the protesters and change agents become comfortable with their surroundings. Parent potency as participators in change may be nullified by indoctrination and the process of participation may exclude the voices of the marginalized.

Principals remain key to successful implementation of school governance structures.

The case evidence countermands the hopes of McLaren (1989) who identifies the goal of parent participation as something that leads to self-empowerment and social transformation. The case evidence is clear that the strength of the principal and the personal power he or she holds defines the perception of success and smooth operation of the school councils. Through controlling behavior the principal is engaged in manufacturing consent by the strength and participation of their personalities, charisma, and by being positionally informed about what the broader culture desires. A parent remarks,

> I think that initially there was supposed to be all this local empowerment. But my feeling is that the administrators really can't let go. So, I mean, they have to do that before we can pick it up down the bottom. I don't think that's done. . . I think no one is really willing to give up enough power to really make it what we thought it was going to be initially. . .I thought we'd have a little more power in

decision making. . . . The feeling is that a lot of the decisions that we make are really pretty petty stuff, which, of course, makes the whole things work, too.

Being a strong leader is a two-edged sword. Powerful principals, as is evident in both cases in the study, allow school councils and their members to perform in a contextually effective and socio-politically approved manner and, at the same time, they prevent emancipatory growth of the council membership. Principals guide the case councils toward culturally approved success. This is not the path to true liberatory empowerment and contribution toward school improvement for the sake of children.

Perhaps then the desired role of the principal is, " honest broker, a person who seeks an agreement fair to all parties, a person who starts and ends with no power, an informed but selfless individual who seeks to help the parties enlarge or alter their view of their mutual interests" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998, p. 27). In the case evidence presented the pretense of being a broker is evident, but the principals retain all the essential power in decision-making situations and parents remain outside the culture constructs which allow them to effect radical change.

How, if at all, does parent power manifest itself through school-site decision-making bodies at the school site?

Parent participation in school-site decision making does not change the way decisions are made about curriculum, budget, or personnel.

In the case of Valley Elementary School, the Council was legally prohibited from making decisions about personnel. It could make recommendations to the principal for consideration regarding curriculum and budget, but the decision-making process moved quickly beyond the members. Although not specifically delineated, the same

remains true for the Hilltop Elementary School Council. It does not make decisions about the crucial areas of personnel, curriculum, or budget. These results confirm data offered in earlier studies examining school-site decision-making councils (e.g. Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). Members of the Councils at both research sites expressed some frustration over the lack of decision-making capacity regarding personnel, budget, and curriculum. A community member of the Valley Elementary School council finds,

> I feel we're there more as a support group. Not really ones that make big decisions. Many of us . . . well not many . . . a few of us on the council don't have a school-related background . . . So I don't think that some of the decisions we make have a lot of influence on what goes on.

Council members believed that they served a positive purpose by working on the Council, however, some Council members saw themselves as not making any *important* decisions.

Will parent participation wane as frustration builds regarding their inability to decide certain crucial matters? Will the maintenance of effort needed to effect change be challenged by impatience? Fear that not enough time will be allowed for continued change and growth has emerged in other studies (e.g. Johnson & Pajares, 1996). Johnson and Pajares (1996) found that power shifts do occur over time and that barriers to authority do begin to melt away. However, at both study sites, this has not been the case. Principals, central office administrators, and school boards retain their authority and are reticent to relinquish it to building councils. Again, case evidence demonstrates a lack of praxis. There is no institutional willingness to relinquish control to informed co-learners and participants, nor is there a strong inclination toward informed action through deep reflection at the local building level. It is

possible, that over the years as SSDMBs become well established that power shifts may occur.

Parent participation does change the way in which parents who participate view school problems

Case evidence shows that parents are motivated to participate in school governance because they believe they are helping their children and they believe they have a responsibility of citizenship within schools. Parents believe that by participating they will be on the inside of the process and be able to influence school results that ultimately effect the quality of the school experience for their own children. A Hilltop parent observes,

> I think I have an impact . . . one example is the multi-age classroom that took place. And now we're doing multi-age, and all these other things for the first grade next year. I think a lot of that had to do with the parents [being] really. . . optimistic and really welcomed those programs with open arms.

Parents want to feel they are contributing to their child's education (McCaleb, 1994). They seek information and they expect to be well informed about issues they are deciding. Most parent participation models identify participation in school governance as important (Epstein, 1987; Swap, 1993; Vincent, 1996), yet parents appear to be "unassailably well intentioned but lacking in the scope and sensitivity of what is at stake" (Sarason, 1995, p.12).

Parents tend to get most of the information they need from the school principal, mass media, and from their peers. As they participate on the *inside* of school they become comfortable with the nature, setting, and operation of the school's socio-political structure. They become *insiders*, privy to privileged information and inflated

by the hubris of a *better* understanding of what is really at stake. This allows parents to feel more compassion for the daily struggles of school members, particularly principals and teachers. Thus, parents who may have set out to participate in school governance to effect change become converts and supportive of a domesticated status-quo.

A recursive pattern exists in which parents appear to be participating in their own indoctrination. The power structure of schools remains hierarchical and authoritarian except in the actions by large enraged, some might call *revolutionary* groups, such as in the case evidence presented regarding air quality at Hilltop Elementary, or the vociferous political pressure that caused the superintendent at Valley to resign. A mother from Hilltop states, " I think our school has about twenty-five to thirty parents who would be ready to take on probably any fight if we felt that it was important to our kids".

Yet, it appears that parents are part of their own oppression. Participating parents may be at the stage of consciousness Freire (1993) calls "naive transitivity". They see problems as presented to them by the dominant structure of school as over-simplifications. A parent comments, "I felt powerless, and I'd been in school for quite a while. I just felt that they [the administration and teachers] were going to handle it. The school was going to handle it". Or as Apple (1982) suggests, parents are just well intentioned actors who contribute simply by pursuing their own ends. Parents have moved into their own hegemonic reality by participating in school governance.

Socio-economic status defines participation at school and in the decision making process.

At both research sites participating parents recognized that many other parents

were missing from the decision-making table. At both sites efforts were made to involve as many community members as possible in the schools; however, the majority of parents remained marginalized. Interview and observation evidence corroborated the marginalization of the vast majority of parents for different reasons. Informants spoke of time, family obligations, work obligations, and lack of interest as some of the reasons for lack of participation. Some informants reported a certain amount of impatience with parents who were not present. One parent reports, "You know, obviously the ones that get involved do. They represent such a small percentage". Parents at both sites felt that if other parents wanted to be involved they would be. There seemed to be little empathy for life circumstances that would prevent participation.

Parent participation in the governance of the school revolved around a sense of confidence in one's self and in a sense of access to the school and the complex issues it contained. Those parents who were confident about school and who felt like "a force of nature" participated in school and garnered feelings of success from their participation. The marginalized parents tended to be seen as less comfortable with school, less educated about school and less comfortable about how they relate to school. These parents tended to be seen as members of low income families.

Quint's (1994) use of a social reconstructivist perspective led her to discover that the bureaucracy of schools and the social fabric of a school community produced haves and have nots. The haves and have nots are found woven through the greater social-political cloth of the community and also within the local social composition of the school. The have nots were systematically and systemically blocked from participating in school. These are the parents who are marginalized in the study. Low

income parents are left out of the governance process of both schools in the study. The critical question becomes why?

Case evidence in both studies shows that the schools try to reach out to the community through newsletters, school-based activities, and community-based activities. The schools were concerned about getting parents to school and yet most parents still do not participate in school governance. In this study there is no evidence that illustrates how parents participate within the home through home work support and the like. Research shows this kind of participation in schooling is important to school success of individual children, but it does not influence the culture or structure of schools so is not consequential to this dialogue.

Parents can be intimidated by school.

Parents are a subordinated culture in school. They possess little of the special knowledge that educational insiders have relating to curriculum, instruction, and school operation which would allow them to fully participate. It may be the recognition of this that has spurred the invitation to participate in school-site decision-making. Parents also find strength and comfort in the familiar. They are seeking to become more comfortable with school. Parents at both case sites carry with them family and personal histories of interactions with schools that define their perspective. In the study we find that parents remain intimidated with school because of personal experience or a lack of self-efficacy with regard to the structure of school and the nature and complexity of educational issues. Even those parents who participate in the governance process and express confidence and pride in their work do so under what appears to be internalized pressure of the need to know which is derived from the intimidation of not knowing.

Parents do not realize their own cultural capital. In some of the case evidence, parents and other school community members shared specific situations where the weight and momentum of parent commitment and belief changed the school environment,

> It's because the parents became upset. But we've had people who have been so ill that they've had to leave the building. And they were dismissed by the administration, saying they either have psychosomatic illnesses or they were making more of it than it really was. And even though they tried to document everything, and they had been to the doctors. . .it didn't matter how many teachers were sick. It didn't matter how many times teachers had reported that the children were coughing. Or brought up concerns that we had such a rise in asthma cases from first to fourth grade. None of that seemed to push anything forward until the parents realized what was going on and actually became involved. So parents definitely have power.

Yet, in daily practice parents do not seem to exert the true strength of their presence at school.

How, if at all, does the distribution of power among stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators) differ within mandated and voluntary elementary school-site decision-making bodies?

There is little relative difference between voluntary and mandated school-site decision making.

The voluntary establishment of school-site decision making is usually generated by grass roots work of local educational community members invested in contributing

to their school. Hilltop Elementary School experienced a progression of leadership methods which moved from a traditional autocratic leadership form, to ad hoc committees, to a school-site council that uses small task oriented groups to accomplish their work. When the school district decided to commit to school-site councils Hilltop Elementary School was culturally ready to take the next step because the current practice was congruent with district expectations. There was little disruption to school routines. Some training was provided and the Council began its work.

At Valley Elementary School some work was accomplished in committees, however, the state law that enforced the establishment of school-site decision-making bodies in every school was structurally very specific. The framework provided by the law included size and membership of the Council, as well as operation guidelines that outline reporting procedures and chain of command. There was little opportunity for progressive development of Council practices by the local educational community.

As the Council at Hilltop Elementary established its working priorities and implemented practices recommended through training, certain routines and expectations were fashioned. Suggestions of good practice gleaned from training, research literature, and experience caused the Council to modify its operations in a way that made its working conditions look very much like the Council at Valley. This is quite evident as one compares the case evidence of routines, dialogue, and rhetoric of the Councils.

Each council has an established hierarchy within the group. The principal is definitely the authority in operational matters. There is a set of *officers* who facilitate

the work of the councils. Minutes are taken during meetings and systematically distributed to the educational community-at-large. Each council produces a School Improvement Plan that it submits to the district superintendent and school board. The School Improvement Plan guides decision making throughout the school year. Goals are reviewed at the end of each year and changes and modifications are made.

There are some dissimilarities between the two councils. Members of each council are elected through a systematic process; however the process differs slightly between the two sites. Although both sites tend to draw their parent membership from the PTO, Valley Elementary School methodically pursues community members as mandated by law. Hilltop, on the other hand, does not have any members from the community-at-large on its council.

Each Council meets at a routine time and place and follows an agenda that is managed by the principal. At Valley Elementary there is a teacher who is identified as a facilitator who assists in distributing meeting minutes and arranging certain Council events. The Valley Elementary School Council has a balance of membership between school personnel and parents that is outlined in the state law. Hilltop Elementary School has three parent members and as many as fourteen school staff members.

Interestingly, although there is no force of law regarding internal operations, Hilltop Elementary has a highly structured meeting protocol which includes a timer, a specific meeting length, and a precise agenda format. The Valley Elementary Council tends to follow a "looser" format that does include a working agenda. Meetings were held at Valley that were broken down into small task-oriented work groups.

Both Councils considered matters of importance to the school. They discussed physical modifications to the school plant, they debated issues brought forward by

members of the school community, and they pursued the goals established through the school improvement plans. Hilltop Elementary tended to have more direct contact with plaintiffs who wished to have a specific issue resolved. Students, parents, and teachers brought forward issues during the open forum part of the agenda at each meeting. The Council at Valley Elementary tended to address broader more systemic issues such as the development and promulgations of the school improvement plan. Hilltop moves its agenda by building consensus, whereas Valley tends to make decisions by majority vote. In both cases, as noted earlier, the principal is a potent influence.

Essentially, both Councils produced the same products and their quotidian practices were more similar than dissimilar. One might expect that a grass roots movement would have different characteristics than one established by state law. Why then do the councils look so much alike?

The continuously emerging social framework of school reform draws from a milieu of deficit. The strategy of school-site decision-making bodies has been inculcated into national, state, and local reform efforts (e.g. Goals 2000). Herein lies one answer to the question of similarity between the two Councils examined - the Councils are generated within the same societal frameworks.

The Councils are essentially the same and expect the same results because the dominant culture is the same no matter what the pretense of local change. They are located in similar educational communities and they experience the same national and regional rhetoric. Lightfoot (1978) recognized the permeability of the social-political setting of schools. It is evident that the school sites in this study are nested in the broader social fabric of a dominant culture (Leistyna, Woodrum & Sherblom, 1996).

The Councils' proximity to each other situate cultural linkages both within the educational establishment and the geographic region that make any attempt at true difference a courageous illusion. Therefore, Councils are not efficacious --there is little or no difference in the operation and the results of either school-site decision-making body. School-site decision-making bodies were added to the lexicon of schooling as a liberatory practice yet they have been absorbed into the imposing bureaucratic system that directs them.

An Emerging Metaphor

Within the school-site decision-making social-political posture parents act as trustees. The reform strategy of school governance does not increase parent involvement, it diverts it.

One of the most powerful tools that can be generated from a critical case study is a working metaphor which allows others to continue the dialogue of deconstruction and unveiling with a scaffolding of conceptual understanding for what has been discovered through reflection. The case record in this study suggest the metaphor of *trustee.*

In oppressed cultures throughout the ages, certain members of the lower class have been able to rise above their peers to the rank of Trustee. A Trustee that has risen from the lower less informed position is, and always will be, a member of that lower class from, but he or she has been able to separate from the masses by a demonstration of understanding and compliance to the ruling classes dictums and dogma. Essentially, trustees remain oppressed and controlled but their life conditions appear marginally better. They are aware of their better life more often then they are

the moral conflict of continuing the oppressive system that restricts their lower brethren.

In modern day prisons, trustees are indoctrinated into the required social behavioral expectation of their guardians. Trustees have learned that they can be *more free* than their peers by conformance to the rule. They earn privileges that appear to bring them closer to the higher society of the guards, warden and outside world. At the same time, they are participating in their own oppression and the oppression of their fellow inmates by perpetuating the status quo.

Readers may find that a slave or a prison analogy with regard to school-site decision-making is too harsh. However, the analogies ring true. The case data shows that parents, as participants in school-site decision-making, become trustees of the status quo. In fact, parents who participate in school-site decision making may be kept from any meaningful participation. They reach the decision-making table and they are quickly indoctrinated into the process, procedure, and expectations of the school bureaucratic structure. They are not ever given real freedom to decide. They lose what Giroux (1983) calls the "language of possibility." By indoctrination parents become guarantors of the status-quo. Parents, as participants in school governance, seem to totally ignore that the rationale for the governance structure of schools is still the rationale of days gone by. "Schools are not the 'factories' they once were, but their underlying social-psychological rationale continues to have similarly stultifying effects on students, teachers, principals, and others (Sarason, 1995b). The governance structure of schools "has changed not at all" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998, p. 146). The principal, superintendent, and school board remain firmly in control.

In both case studies there is no struggle or transformation in the school governance process - the parents who can participate in school governance, do participate. Parents who participate in school-site decision-making in the study tended to be more educated and more well informed about the expectations of the school's bureaucratic structure. They appear to be motivated more to understand the process than to change it significantly. Most parents, however, were on the periphery of school operations. The marginalized parent suffers from class restrictions and parents who do participate have assumed the role of trustee.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools are "part of a complicated, hierarchically organized system the parts of which have conflicting interests, a turf-protective stance, and a zero-sum orientation in regard to resource allocation" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998, p. 9). Parent participation in school-site decision-making at the two sites in this study is a positive experience from the point of view of socialization and indoctrination. Parents who do participate feel more connected and more informed. They do not, however, effect any significant change in the school structure or operation. They are restricted by their own participation in the dominant school culture as well as by the authoritarian imposition of administrative control and state law. They are also managed by the strong effective principals in such a way as to move not too far way from the prevailing culture of acceptable organizational thinking and action.

There must be a change in the norms of the system that addresses the conventional organizational thinking that is "wasteful, impoverishing, and self-defeating" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998. p. x). The linking of popular education to local control and power constructs has failed. If the establishment of SSDMBs continues as a

reform strategy, then steps must be taken to allow SSDMBs to fulfill their revolutionary potential. If no change in process or implementation takes place and SSDMBs remain a narcissistic strategy of middle-class populists, then schools will not change and a potentially radical change strategy will be nullified.

A Final Word on the Critical Theory Perspective

A Critical Theory perspective puts at the core of research the view of knowledge and experience as intertwined with emancipatory or repressive agency (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). The nature of the research questions in the study dictated a critical theory perspective. Now, as the discourse continues, it is different. Changes resulting from the interaction of language, observation, and reflection have modified the perspective of the researcher and the informants. This is the fundamental nature of a critical critique. Nothing about the human exchange nested in a socio-political reality is stagnant. In the most positive sense, the human exchanges in research are about the growth of personal capital and the multifarious iterations of human endeavor.

Critical theorists question the *framework* of the way we organize our lives or the way our lives are organized for us (Foster, 1986, p.76). Schools are about relationships between ourselves and others, between teachers, students, administrators, and parents. Field researchers undertake their projects not just *in* a field site, but "within a field of competing discourses that help structure a variegated system of socially constituted human relationships" (McLaren in McLaren & Giarelli, 1996, p. 275). Critical ethnography "contests epistemological closure" (McLaren & Giarelli, 1996, p. 282). By its very nature this critical discourse cannot stop. It must enter into the stream of meaning making that the research and the readers of this report will continuously develop and modify. This is the strength of a critical

perspective. It is not destructive, but it is perpetually deconstructing with a skeptical eye and in the name of those not participating.

Propositions

In a critical case study the importance of the results are measured against the energetic continuation of the dialogue. What do the results of the study indicate? What propositions for the future dialogue can be determined? The following are propositions which may assist in guiding future conversations and investigations.

Proposition #1 - Unless a reculturing (Fullan, 1997) occurs at the school and community level that is intimate and substantial no leadership or governance strategy will change the structure or the performance of most schools. Educators and community members must protect themselves from "the myth that the future would [or should] be a carbon copy of the present" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998, p. 155). Therefore, either put aside SSDMBs as a primary change strategy or increase the commitment and potency of the practice.

Proposition #2 - Make the familiar strange (Giroux, 1997) - continually examine all current practices and reposition them within the cultural change process to facilitate a freeing of the oppressed sub-cultures such as parents who do and do not participate at the school site.

Proposition #3 - Address role theory systemically. Parents seek a participative role in their child's education. Most certainly parent potency as an agent of change can be increased through informed participation. Those parents who are most active gravitate toward governance roles. They are, however, unclear as to what their role and capacity is within such structures. Seek to clarify, but not to limit the role parents play in school governance.

Proportion #4 - The value of change is often counterintuitive. Nothing is foreordained and designed change does not exist in human endeavor. Maintenance of effort is the nexus to the future of schools and their potential.

Proposition #5 - Investigation of the relationship between school change and the *professional* educator is indicated. The categorical relationship between the success of building level school reform and the efforts of school principals is confirmed by this study. Teachers are also confirmed as a powerful presence. This result leads one to consider the emergence of a professional educator as the benevolent power within the school community. A leader who is recognized as the definitive, authoritative, integrative, and compassionate individual within the community is sought. A leader that may disavow populists movements for the greater good of the community he or she knows best.

Proposition #6 - Seek the larger public discourse and use schools as a clarity lens for understanding. Context does matter (Giroux, 1997) and education is always influenced by the time and place in which it occurs (Callahan, 1960). Expanding the socio-political dialogue and the cultural investment in education is the seed of improvement.

LIMITATION

The researcher in any study is the primary collector and organizer of data, therefore the researcher must necessarily act as a "filter" of the data collected (Merriam, 1988). The filter function is based on the researchers theoretical, social, and political perspective thus the theoretical perspective of this study is explicitly expressed. Limitations of time, access, and researcher expertise are also concerns.

Long term engagement, triangulation of data, accurate documentation, key informant evaluation, and positioned observer reflection are used to address these concerns.

SUMMARY

Parent participation in school-site decision-making is a change effort nested in a deficit view of schooling. School-site decision-making is viewed as a method of completing and strengthening schools. It is ineffectual in significant change because it has been absorbed into the bureaucratic structure and existing culture of school. The present and the future are complex, non-linear, paradoxical and frequently unpredictable (Fullan, 1997) and therefore it is not acceptable to give up on change, growth, and modification, but rather to continue the intense examination and the rigorous striving for intellectual honesty. Hope lies within the dialogue.

Endnotes

1. The term School-site Decision-Making Bodies (SSDMBs) was chosen specifically in acknowledgment of the diverse forms that school governance takes at the state, school district, and building level.

2. The semi-structured interview protocol and focus group protocol consisted of 49 and 11 questions respectively and were modified as the research continued. Samples of the question formats are found below.

a. Semi-structured interview protocol:

Tell me about yourself and how you are involved in school.
What do you think the benefits of the school council are?
Have you experienced changes in your own feelings as your participation in the council progressed?
Are there areas that you would like the school council to get more involved?
How are the council members encouraged to share ideas?
What are the factors that support the continued operation of the council?
Describe the principals relationship to the council.
Who could I go to for more information on the school council?

b. Focus group protocol:

What is your understanding of the council and how it operates?
Are the needs of the parents being met by the council?
What efforts are made to encourage parents to participate?
What do you think of parent participation and its impact on school?

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